



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

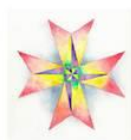
Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion A



Christ Carrying the Cross as portrayed by EL GRECO - Domenikos Theotokopoulos, 1580



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Sing or recite the following hymn.

All Glory, Laud, and Honor

You are the king of Israel
And David's royal Son,
Now in the Lord's name coming,
Our King and Blessed One.
All glory, laud, and honor
To you, Redeemer, King
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.

The company of angels
Are praising you on high;
Creation and all mortals
In chorus make reply.
All glory, laud, and honor
To you, Redeemer, King
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.

The multitude of pilgrims
With palms before you went,
Our praise and prayer and anthems
Before you we present.
All glory, laud, and honor

To you, Redeemer, King
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.

To you, before your Passion,
They sang their hymns of praise.
To you, now high exalted,
Our melody we raise.
All glory, laud, and honor
To you, Redeemer, King
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.

Their praises you accepted;
Accept the prayers we bring,
Great author of all goodness,
O good and gracious King.
All glory, laud, and honor
To you, Redeemer, King
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.

(A traditional hymn for Palm Sunday, public domain)

Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today is Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, the beginning of the holiest week in our church calendar. Today we tell the story of the Lord's Passion and death from the evangelist Matthew's perspective.
- ▶ Refer to Word and Worship Workbook Year A (Paulist Press) for a thorough treatment of Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion.
- ▶ Today we commemorate the Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem as well as his passion and death. We celebrate the Lord's entry by processing with palm branches.
- ▶ Palms were added to the solemn liturgy @the eighth century. Pagan belief suggested that palm branches contained special magical powers. Christianity appropriated the pagan use of palms by having them blessed, and using them in devotional practices intended to ask for protection from storms and from evil.
- ▶ There are three forms for the procession with palms. The first form hearkens back to the earliest fourth century ritual. The liturgy begins in another place, palms are blessed, and the gospel is proclaimed and all solemnly process with branches into the church. The second, less solemn form begins in the church, outside the sanctuary. The gospel is proclaimed and the presider and others process with palm into the sanctuary. The third and least solemn—the simple entrance--begins with the presider processing into the church. The procession with palms is not to overshadow the proclamation of the passion.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?

If time is a consideration, there may not be time to reflect on all of the readings of today's liturgy, you may only have time to concentrate on the Passion. You could simply read the interpretive material to give participants a sense of those texts and omit the reflection questions or you may omit some of the readings altogether. Participants could be given the reflection questions that were omitted for reflection in their journal throughout the coming week.

Catholic
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& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
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Entrance Gospel: Matthew 21: 1-11

- ▶ We are told Jesus came from Bethany and Bethpage—house of the poor and house of figs—both were reminders of pending judgment against the city of Jerusalem.
- ▶ Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem--the place where prophets are martyred. Judgment is against the holy city because like the fig tree it did not bear the fruit it was suppose to bear.
- ▶ The long awaited messiah was prophesied to enter Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Successors to ancient thrones mounted a donkey and rode triumphantly to accept their new royal throne.
- ▶ The waving of palms was used in the Feast of Booths in Jewish antiquity as a sign of victory and of the final age.
- ▶ The throngs of people waving their palm was a sign that Jesus is the fulfillment of that eschatological hope—the Messiah of the final age.
- ▶ Jesus entered Jerusalem as King and as the one who would come to save the world. Matthew's intent is to publicly herald the royal Christ.
- ▶ Scholars suggest that this event probably did not take place on the grand scale that is suggested in the text. Had that been the case all involved would have been immediately arrested for creating civil unrest.
- ▶ Scholarship suggests that Jesus was parabolically enacting the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, Meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass."
- ▶ The word "humble" is more appropriately translated in the original text as "gentle." While Jesus is no doubt humble, the *gentle* adjective is a reminder that the "gentle" king enters the city with no violent intent, willing to endure whatever his enemies have in store for him.
- ▶ Jesus processes to his coronation that would ultimately be a crown of thorns and the cross. The shouts of "Hosanna!" (Save now) echo Psalm 118: 24, 25: "This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice in it and be glad. LORD, grant salvation!"
- ▶ Matthew, with typical dramatic flair, punctuates the event with an earthquake of suspicious origin, shaking the city's foundation.
- ▶ Great irony is found in this text. The ultimate King of the world entered the holy city that should have embraced him and recognized who he was. His coronation was not upon a gilded throne, but rather upon a cross. It is from that object of torture that he would be crowned the crucified king.
- ▶ The peace the angels proclaimed at his birth comes to fulfillment now in his death—only through his death will the peace of Eden be restored.
- ▶ We often self-righteously imagine that if we had been privy to such an event, we would have recognized this Messiah King. We cannot forget Jesus' own exhortation to audiences antique and contemporary: "Only those who do the will of my Father will enter the kingdom." Can we say with certainty that we can count ourselves among them?



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ Consider your own personality and your faith, as you understand yourself. Do you think you would have been among those who waved their palms and later turned against Jesus with the rest of the crowd or would you have been among those who waved their palms and stood by him?
- ▶ What are the implications and challenge of your honest reflection?

First reading: Isaiah 50: 4-7

Third song of the Servant of God

- ▶ The servant in Isaiah's reading would not be deterred in his mission to proclaim God's word.
- ▶ The people were tired of his futile optimism in the face of their suffering in exile.
- ▶ God gave him a word to speak to the people and nothing would keep him from doing the will of God.
- ▶ The Christian community believed that the suffering servant of Isaiah was Jesus.
- ▶ Jesus, like the servant, would not be deterred from his appointed mission—to love God's people, to teach them, to save them and to free them by his sacrificial death on the cross.
- ▶ Jesus' faithfulness to the mission God gave him resulted in his death (the fate of all prophets).



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group. See appendix #1.

- ▶ Jesus was the Messiah and Savior, however he was also a Prophet.
- ▶ Prophets often bring a message that people resist—change is difficult and people do not like being challenged, especially people in power.
- ▶ Jesus would not be deterred from his saving mission—no matter the consequences. If we are all baptized into Jesus' priestly, royal and prophetic ministry, then we too are called to speak a prophetic word—

even if it brings wrath down upon our heads. Can you imagine a situation in your life in which you might be called upon to speak a prophetic word? What would be the result?

- ▶ What are the implications of living the prophetic life? Jesus gave us an example—what are we to learn from his example?

Second Reading: Philippians 2: 6-11

God's Son though he was, Jesus took the form of a slave.

- ▶ Many scholars believe that this is a hymn that was used in very ancient liturgies.
- ▶ Jesus humiliated himself, took the form of a slave and thus saved the world. He entered the human condition—he learned first hand what it meant to be rejected, betrayed, misunderstood, maligned, gossiped about, and hated. He was treated as a criminal.
- ▶ Jesus' perfect kenosis (the outpouring of himself in total abandonment and humiliation) resulted in the resurrection and by extension the salvation of the human race.
- ▶ Paul was asking his factious community to accept the posture of Jesus. Jesus could have claimed special rights of nobility. He chose instead to come as one among the poor—to come as a slave. Paul reminds his divided community that if they would only assume Jesus' posture of self-abasement, there would be no need for divisions in the community.
- ▶ Jesus "became sin". He entered the human condition—he became one with us. He understood what it means to be betrayed, to be frustrated, to be angry, and to endure suffering and persecution--to be faced with difficult choices. He was like us in all things except sin.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group.

- ▶ What does it mean to you that Jesus became sin? What are the implications for your life?
- ▶ If Jesus' experienced a complete abandonment of self for the salvation of the world, how might you completely and totally abandon yourself for the sake of others? In other words, have you ever allowed yourself to be humiliated for the sake of another? How would our world today respond to such a suggestion? (Does this mean we are called to be a door mat?)

The Passion According to Matthew: 26: 14-27:66

- ▶ It is important to interpret the Passion narrative within the context of the community for whom it was intended.
- ▶ Rome was in control of the people. Historians of the time refer to Jesus as a criminal. Matthew's intent was to soften that portrait and to portray Pilate as a fair arbiter who heralded Jesus' innocence.
- ▶ Pilate tells the Roman crowds that Jesus is not a criminal.
- ▶ Matthew is also speaking to a Jewish audience and thus issues that involve Christianity's tension with the synagogue are also brought to bear.
- ▶ Self-righteous, evil-minded religious authorities no doubt have the greatest culpability. However, it is naïve to assume that among Jesus' accusers were very holy leaders who thought they were saving the people from this rebellious, liberal upstart.
- ▶ Lest we self-righteously count ourselves among Jesus' defenders, let us keep in mind that good, God-fearing people were manipulated into seeing Jesus as a dangerous heretic that needed to be silenced.
- ▶ Throughout his Gospel Matthew's primary concern is to show that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. He is the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy.
- ▶ As we approach this story we are to put ourselves in the shoes of every antagonist and protagonist in the story.
- ▶ Whose shoes will we wear on any given day?
 - Could they be the shoes of Judas who wanted a military Messiah—not a servant Messiah—and thus who ultimately sold Jesus out for mere pieces of silver?
 - Could they be the shoes of Peter who denied his association with Christ out of fear?
 - Could they be the shoes of Pilate or anyone else who chooses to wash their hands of responsibility and thus allow the innocent to suffer and die?
 - Could it be the shoes of the religious leaders who saw themselves as the only authority and could not look past rigid adherence of the Law to its heart—intimate relationship with God?
 - Could it be the shoes of every person who “goes along with the crowd” and gets swept up in condemning others?



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites reflection in groups of two, surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ Choose one of those pairs of shoes and connect it to your own life. Have you ever worn any of those shoes—the shoes of the characters in the Passion story? What are the implications and challenges for your life?

- ▶ Jesus is the Suffering Servant who shows every disciple the way of the cross. He held his head high. He embraced his ordeal; he forged ahead and was faithful to the end.
- ▶ God did not will the murder of his only Son; God is all good and could never will an evil action. Murder is an evil action. Thus God could never, would never, will Jesus' murder.
- ▶ God did, however, will Jesus' faithfulness which led to his murder. Jesus was faithful to the end. Complete faithfulness to God's will invites martyrdom.
- ▶ When the world encounters perfect goodness, it usually sets out to destroy it.
- ▶ Jesus' willingly embraced martyrdom for the sake of faithfulness to his Father's will.
- ▶ Jesus' faithfulness stands in contrast to the unfaithfulness of the disciples.
- ▶ Matthew puts blame for Jesus death squarely on the shoulders of the Sadducees, the chief priests (thus the reason the Pharisees are absent from the scene).
- ▶ We are reminded that Jesus is the new Adam. He was tested and found faithful. Adam was disobedient to God in the Garden of Eden. Jesus was faithful unto death in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- ▶ The disciples in Matthew's version of events were fully aware of his identity. Their betrayal is all the more despicable.
- ▶ Knowing who he was, how could they have abandoned him?
- ▶ God's plan of salvation—through Christ—is a path of suffering. When Peter cut off the ear of the soldier it was a reminder that yes, God could show his might and power and send armies to engage the forces of evil, but he chose instead, the non-violent faithfulness and death of his Son, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and all who would similarly follow after him.
- ▶ The contrast between Peter and Judas is also striking—the former accepted God's mercy and forgiveness and wept for his transgression, the latter hanged himself.
- ▶ Matthew's community was primarily a Jewish Christian community. Tension between the synagogue, Jews and Christians was rife.
- ▶ Matthew posits an anti-Jewish bias as a result of what was taking place in his community. Rather than sugar coat this bias we must address it head on. Scripture insisted that anyone whose lie resulted in the death of another person carried that person's innocent blood for all eternity. Matthew felt justified in his condemnation.
- ▶ Two thousand years later we must not forget that Jesus died for everyone—Jew and Gentile alike. Jew **and** Gentile put him to death. He was tried by a Jewish court and sentenced by a Roman court. No one can wash his or her hands of responsibility.
- ▶ Matthew takes great pains to illustrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Scriptural allusions abound.

- ▶ Jesus stands with every human being who has known the utter powerlessness of unrelenting pain and sorrow. He cried out to his Father in great torment. He stands with every person who has similarly cried out to God for help. Jesus did not despair. He did, however express sorrow and anguish to the core of his being.
- ▶ Matthew takes great pains to prove that God did not abandon Jesus. The earth stands in testimony as it erupts while witnessing the dawn of the new, final, messianic age.
- ▶ With great pangs of labor, the reign of God was born.
- ▶ As Jesus drew his last breath the dead came forth from their graves. When Jesus ascended to his Father they took their place at the long awaited heavenly court.
- ▶ God proclaimed his Son vindicated as the earth cried “amen!” in its volcanic upheaval. What better witness to God’s power than the earth itself!



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What touched you the most in this Passion narrative?
- ▶ How would you describe the primary message of the Passion to a non-believer?
- ▶ With whom do you most relate? Jesus? Pilate? Peter? Disciples? The religious leaders? The crowd?
- ▶ What do you think of a God that would allow the brutal death of his only Son? What does that tell us about God? About God’s relationship to us? Why did God allow his Son’s death? (See appendix # 3 below) What are the implications?
- ▶ What do you think about Jesus’ cry of abandonment? How does it speak to your life? Have you ever felt abandoned? What are the implications of Jesus’ cry for help to God for your own life?
- ▶ What is the challenge of the Passion? What does the Passion call us to as Christians?
- ▶ What cross is God inviting you to carry at this time in your life?
- ▶ In what way does it invite you to grow in faith and to be a better disciple?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?
- ▶ In what way does the Passion of Christ invite you more deeply into Christ's life, death and resurrection? (A good question for ongoing reflection in your journal throughout the week.)

CLOSING PRAYER

If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with a minor rite—a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA # 90-97.

and/or

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

*Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.
I trust in you: strengthen my trust.
I love you: let me love you more and more.
I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.
I worship you as my first beginning.
I long for you as my last end.
I praise you as my constant helper.
And I call you as my loving protector.
I want to do what you ask of me:
In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.
Let me love you Lord as my God.
And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.
A Christian called to respect and love all whose lives I touch.*

Prayer to the Most Precious Blood of Jesus

By St. Catherine of Siena

*Precious Blood,
Ocean of Divine Mercy:
Flow upon us!*

*Precious Blood,
Most pure Offering:
Procure us every Grace!*

*Precious Blood,
Hope and Refuge of sinners:
Atone for us!*

*Precious Blood,
Delight of holy souls:
Draw us!*

Amen.

APPENDIX

1. Right now our country is embroiled in so many divisive issues. Those on the right think they have God's favor, as do those on the left. Each group is unbending, unyielding and closed to listen to one another's perspectives.

It is difficult to preach the Gospel in the midst of the political camps that dot the landscape today. If I am pro-life from womb to tomb, if I favor opening our borders for people who cannot feed their families and helping those who are already in our country become legal, productive members of our society, if I am pro gun control, pro health care for all of God's citizens, if I believe God put us on this earth to be good stewards of it and thus calls us to pay attention to climate change and all that we do to hurt God's creation, I do not fit in any one political party. No political party today embraces a Gospel perspective.

I embrace such issues because I believe they are constitutive of the Gospel. However, it is very difficult to say such a thing in our communities today without being accused of being a proponent of a particular party. It is also difficult to maintain a clean heart in the midst of all the controversy. Like it or not, we are impacted by political ideologies of the day.

All I can do is forge ahead and ask that God give me a clean heart, challenge my motives and when I am wrong correct me. My fear is that when I do exercise my prophetic role I am truly exercising the mind and heart of God. We can fool ourselves. Jesus went to his death because of human sin. I am called to pattern my life after his sacrificial life and death.

The prayer of the psalmist must be ever on my lips if I am to preach and live a just and true word, "Create in me a clean heart O Lord. Put a steadfast spirit in me; cast me not away from your presence, and take not your spirit from me. Give me the joy of your salvation and a willing spirit sustain in me. I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you. (Ps. 51)" Jesus went to his death because he did not care what apple cart he upset. He was a voice for truth and righteousness. He spoke up for those who could not speak for themselves. It is important for me to remember that Jesus had very little tolerance for the self-righteous. It was they who were most responsible for his death. I pray that God cast away any self-righteousness lurking within me—that he creates in me a clean heart. That is why he died. That was his gift to all of us. May I live up to so great a gift!

2. I once was heavily embroiled in a parish controversy. Sides were taken. Friends were forged only with people on one's own side. When we gathered with friends on our side of the controversy we often gave into the temptation to demonize those with whom we had issues. I remember the feeling of dripping sin creeping up my spine and into my consciousness. It was most unpleasant. I remember the

looks and stares when one of us tried on occasion to be a voice of reconciliation or at the very least try to stop the demonization.

The same thing was happening on the other side of the controversy. A man came up to me after all had blown over and told me he wanted to apologize. He was new to the parish. He was told he should hate me and he admitted that he did hate me without having ever met me. He was so sorry for his sin. I too apologized for my contribution.

I often reflected on how it must have been for Jesus. Fully human, like us in all ways but sin, he NEVER gave in to those temptations. He was always the voice of love. No wonder it led to his death. People can feed off of the crowd mentality of anger, hatred and accusations. Jesus died showing us another way. My prayer is that I have the courage to exercise my prophetic role if ever faced with a similar situation.

I recently attended a parish mission in which the homilist spoke of what it means to carry one's cross. "Jesus came to save the world from sin," he reminded us. We believe that the sin to which he referred is not our arbitrary laundry list of do's and don'ts but as St. Augustine taught us, it is the vast, far reaching, all-encompassing destructive power of original sin—the human sinful condition into which we were all born.

Even the great St. Paul insisted: "What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate. (Rom 7:15)" He too was a prisoner to the sin within himself. The retreat master suggested that the cross Christ bore, the sin nailed to that cross is the sinful condition of humanity—that is, the compulsions, obsessions, addictions and behaviors that we hate, but are powerless to change. They are part of the human, sinful condition. The retreat master suggested that to carry one's cross means to daily resist the power of those death-dealing compulsions, obsessions and addictions. He insisted that it is the primary agenda of every Christian. We are called to cast off the deeds of darkness and walk in the shadow of the cross. Only by the power of God can we overcome the powerlessness of our inner drives.

Thus, the compulsions that drive me such as the obsessive need to control my world, the need to be the best, to always be right, to regard those who think, believe or act differently than I do as inferior to name but a few compulsions and obsessions, are born from the sinful world of ego that drives the human psyche.

Christ carried his cross so that we might be strengthened to do the same—so that we might be given the daily grace to resist the influences of sin and be the example of self-sacrificing love for others in our world.

3. Whenever I question why God willed the death of his only Son I refer to Louis Marie Chauvet. Within every sacrament we experience the total kenosis ----self-emptying of Jesus on the cross---an emptying he gives as a sign of God's love for the human race. Sacramental theologian Louis Marie Chauvet insists that in every sacrament we are privileged participants in the drama between the Father and the Son—the son who completely empties himself in the face of total abandonment. The innocent tortured Son who echoes psalm 22's lament of an innocent sufferer—"My God, My God why have you abandoned me?" In the sacraments we are given privileged access to the intimacy between the Father and the Son---the grief-stricken Father, the near despairing and ultimately abandoned Son.

The Father Jesus defended with his life is the same Father who could send armies to rescue him. Yet, what does God do? God remains silent. The Father hides his face. What kind of a Father is he? He is a Father not just of the Son, but of all those the Son came to save. Jesus had work left to do—he had to take his love for humanity to its final and ultimate conclusion. To be in solidarity with the human condition meant that Jesus had to experience death in the face of God's silence, a God who spares no one from it—not even his own faithful Son.

Jesus had to experience the absolute separation of human death and abandonment before he could be truly one with the human race. Chauvet insists that the Paschal Mystery that is present in the sacraments introduces us to a Christ who knows what it means to be abandoned, tortured and seemingly without hope —who poured himself out for every broken person in the world----for us in our times of abandonment and who invites us to offer the same kenosis for others.

Every time we come to the sacraments we are invited to empty ourselves as offering for those who are most abandoned and in so doing share in the ongoing redemption of the cross. What Christ says to us in the sacraments is: DO you know how much I love you? "This much." Then he stretched out his arms and he died.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Cross and Paschal Mystery
Salvation/Soteriology

Overview of Triduum

CROSS AND PASCHAL MYSTERY

Jesus willingly suffers, experiences his passion and death and is crucified on the cross for the salvation of the world. Palm Sunday leads us into the holiest week of the year. We are logically invited to focus on the CROSS AND PASCHAL MYSTERY.

SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY

Jesus enters into the culminating event of his saving mission. He suffers, is crucified and will be raised from the dead. God's plan of salvation for the world intended at the dawn of creation unfolds before us on this Sunday. It is thus most fitting that we focus our attention on

OVERVIEW OF TRIDUUM

Today's extended session will focus on the outline you have just been given that expresses what we are about to celebrate in the liturgies of Holy Week.